

# Considering... Your Risk for Stroke

A Guide to Managing Risk Factors

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**A stroke can happen to anyone, regardless of race, gender, or age. Each year, stroke affects nearly 780,000 Americans, and it is the third leading cause of death in the United States behind heart disease and cancer. The good news is that stroke is preventable if risk factors are treated early. In this handout, we will focus on ways to manage these risk factors and identify the warning signs of a stroke.**

## What is a stroke?

A *stroke* develops when blood flow to the brain stops, preventing oxygen and nutrients from reaching the brain tissue. Without oxygen and nutrients, brain cells start to die, leading to a loss of normal bodily functions. These functions include speaking, vision, and feeling in the face, arms, or legs.

A stroke can be caused by the build-up of *plaque*, a sticky substance found in the arteries that results from high levels of *low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C or "bad" cholesterol)*, *triglycerides (TG)*, and other substances like *blood sugar (glucose)*. Plaque can build up in the arteries leading to your brain and heart, making the arteries narrow and hard. These plaques can break off and create blood clots that can block arteries to the brain, resulting in a stroke.

## My doctor recently told me that I am at risk for stroke. What can I do to prevent it?

The key to preventing a stroke is controlling your *risk factors* and reaching target goals for cholesterol, blood pressure (BP), and blood sugar.

Here are some *risk factors* that you can control:

- ❖ **Your BP should be low.** BP is the most important controllable risk factor for stroke. Normal BP is less than 130/85 millimeters (mm) of mercury (Hg). When BP is high (a condition called *hypertension*), blood vessels in the brain can break. Blood from these broken vessels can leak into the brain tissue, causing a stroke.
- ❖ **Keep your cholesterol in check.** High cholesterol can increase your risk for stroke. Your total cholesterol should be less than 200 milligrams (mg) per deciliter (dL); *high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C or "good" cholesterol)* more than 50 mg/dL in women and more than 40 mg/dL in men; LDL-C less than 100 mg/dL (your LDL-C goal may change depending on how many risk factors you have for coronary heart disease); and TG less than 150 mg/dL.
- ❖ **Control your sugar intake.** Your normal blood sugar level should be less than 100 mg/dL before you eat. People with diabetes have increased levels of blood sugar, and are 2 to 4 times more likely to have a stroke.
- ❖ **Cut back on salt and fat.** Eating a healthy diet and lowering your intake of salt and fat will help to lower your BP and cholesterol levels, reducing your risk for stroke.
- ❖ **If you smoke, stop!** Smoking doubles your risk for stroke and can decrease HDL-C, increase LDL-C, and cause arteries already narrowed by plaque build up to tighten further, decreasing the amount of blood flow.
- ❖ **Don't be a couch potato.** A brisk walk for 30 minutes a day can improve your overall health and your risk for stroke.

## Are there any risk factors that I cannot change?

Yes, some risk factors for stroke that you cannot control include:

- ❖ **Age.** Your risk for stroke doubles for each decade of life after age 55.
- ❖ **Gender.** Men are more likely to have a stroke than women, but most stroke deaths occur among women.
- ❖ **Race.** African-Americans have a higher risk of death from a stroke than Caucasians.
- ❖ **Family or personal history.** You are at higher risk for stroke if a parent, sister, or brother has had one, or if you have had a "mini-stroke" (*transient ischemic attack*).

## What are the warning signs of stroke?

If you suddenly experience any of the following symptoms, call 911 immediately:

- ❖ Numbness or weakness in the face, arm, or leg (especially on one side of the body)
- ❖ Inability to move part of the body
- ❖ Headache with nausea and vomiting
- ❖ Trouble swallowing
- ❖ Blurred vision in one or both eyes
- ❖ Difficulty speaking or understanding words
- ❖ Dizziness, loss of balance, poor coordination
- ❖ Confusion
- ❖ Brief loss of consciousness

**References:** American Diabetes Association. Available at: <http://www.diabetes.org/diabetes-statistics/complications.jsp>. • American Heart Association/American Stroke Association. Available at: [http://www.americanheart.org/downloadable/heart/1200078608862HS\\_Stats%202008.final.pdf](http://www.americanheart.org/downloadable/heart/1200078608862HS_Stats%202008.final.pdf). • American Stroke Association. Available at: [www.strokeassociation.org/](http://www.strokeassociation.org/). • National Stroke Association. Available at: <http://www.stroke.org/site/DocServer/ReducingRiskfactsheet1.doc?docID=403>. • All websites accessed August 27, 2008.



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